

Post Office Box 247
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North Chatham, MA 02650
February 26, 2013

Ms. Pamela S. Stephenson, Division Administrator
Federal Highway Administration
55 Broadway, 10th Floor
Cambridge MA 02142

Attn.: Ms. Damaris Santiago, Environmental Engineer

Thomas P. Donald, P.E.
Director of Bridge Project Development
MassDOT Highway Division
Ten Park Plaza, Suite 4160
Boston MA 02116

Re: Town of Chatham, Mitchell River Bridge
Comments from February 12, 2013 Meeting

Dear Ms. Stephenson and Mr. Donald:

As a citizen of Chatham, I have attended every meeting open to the public regarding the Mitchell River Bridge, including the Consulting Parties' meeting held on February 12, 2013. I believe that because of the efforts of the Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge and the other preservation consulting parties, the Bridge's design has significantly improved. However, no changes came easily; and, as I have stated before, it is my belief that the process has been and continues to be flawed. If the goal of the Section 106 review is to seek alternatives and changes to the project that will avoid, minimize, and mitigate harm to this historic bridge, and the goal of Section 4(f) is to ensure "all possible planning to minimize harm", the choice of Alternative 3 is unsatisfactory.

The Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places determined that the Mitchell River Bridge (Bridge), was eligible for listing on the Register. She described it as "a rare surviving example of a structure embodying the distinctive characteristics of a once-common method of construction", and referred to the Bridge as a structure "of exceptional significance". As such, only the least harmful alternative that is "feasible and prudent" can be chosen. This continues to be Alternative 1B which embodies more wood and is closer in appearance than Alternative 3.

I also believe that the use of the Programmatic Section 4(f) Evaluation for Historic Bridges is an effort to leap-frog over the more stringent requirements of Section 4(f), and is being used to achieve a predetermined outcome. This is a disservice and an insult to the citizens of Chatham, many of whom want assurance that all avenues of review have been explored in the replacement of what the Keeper concluded is "the last remaining single-leaf wooden drawbridge in Massachusetts (and perhaps in the entire United States), and as such, is of exceptional significance."

It was obvious at the February 12th meeting that neither MassDOT nor Federal Highway had any true commitment to using as much wood as possible in the design of the Bridge. The

use of pier caps made of texturized concrete when there is the alternative of using wood is artificial and indeed disrespectful to the “exceptional significance” of the Bridge.

The re-use of portions of the top wooden railings from the existing Bridge would provide some remnant of the National Register-eligible wooden bridge. It would also be a reminder that Chatham citizens took pride in ownership of the last wooden drawbridge: it might not be possible to save the Bridge, but the re-use of the top railing materials would be a reminder of the history of the Bridge.

Safety and speed of vehicular traffic on the Mitchell River Bridge are prime issues of concern to Chatham citizens. Numerous people have spoken at meetings or written letters to our local newspapers about those concerns. Our own Board of Selectmen addressed the issues of speed and safety in a letter to Federal Highway and MassDOT in March, 2012. They asked for design elements to be included in the roadway that would slow down speeds to reduce the likelihood of accidents. However, as expressed in their letter to you dated February 27, 2013, the Selectmen’s “paramount goal” now is to avoid further delays that might jeopardize the funding for the replacement of this bridge. It appears that public safety is not their primary concern. It is my impression that MassDOT has acquiesced in the numerous lengthy delays during the process so that the Selectmen now feel pressured and appear to be willing to abandon their responsibility for the safety of townspeople and visitors in order to get funding for the Bridge.

Bridge Street, under MassDOT’s own definitions, is a rural byway – a local road that does not funnel traffic to any arterials. It is not an Urban Collector as it has been classified by MassDOT. There are no sidewalks in the area other than on the Bridge. Pedestrians walk in the street. Bikers ride in the street. Many families walk with strollers and small children in tow. The existing bridge forces traffic to slow down. I spoke briefly about this at the February 12th meeting, but Mr. Pavao was firm – intractable – about the design speed. He said that the Bridge will be designed for a 30 mph speed but that the Selectmen have the authority to reduce the speed on Bridge Street and on the Bridge. It is hard to imagine that Mr. Pavao does not recognize that if the design speed is 30 miles per hour - unless the town assigns a police officer to monitor traffic – higher speeds will be encouraged.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide my concerns and ask that greater deliberation be given to minimize harm to this extraordinarily important National Register-eligible structure, and to provide us with a structure that might be considered as another in a continuous line of wooden drawbridges, or as close to it as possible. The use of wooden pile caps and a vestige of the top wooden railing would show respect for the Bridge’s history and its place in the history of our town.

Sincerely,

Gloria M. Freeman